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SUBJECT: CANADA: MISSILE DEFENSE DECISION CLEARS THE WAY
FOR CONSENSUS AT LIBERAL PARTY CONVENTION

1. (SBU) Summary: Canada's Liberal Party will hold its biennial convention in Ottawa from March 3 to 7. It will be both a policy convention and a review of PM Martin's leadership. Martin is expected to handily survive the review, and with missile defense now out of the way, only the Same-Sex Marriage resolution is expected to provoke substantial debate. A marijuana legalization item also made its way onto the bottom of the agenda, but is not expected to stir much controversy, and in fact because it is so far down the agenda, may not even be discussed before time runs out. End Summary

The Delegates

2. (SBU) The governing Liberal Party of Canada will hold its biennial convention in Ottawa between March 3 and 7. Select riding association members, Parliamentarians, and Ex-Officio members of the Liberal Party may attend the convention as delegates. Riding associations can send fourteen delegates, but media reports suggest that many have had trouble filling their slots due to a lack of interest and the high cost. A Liberal Party official said this week that 2,000 of 5,000 eligible participants will attend the convention, and insisted this was a good number for a convention that is not electing a new leader. Media sources, however, cite Liberal insiders as saying the party will be lucky to attract 1,500 people, and some commentators suggest that because of the expected small turnout, debate will be muted and uninteresting. Prime Minister Martin and Liberal Caucus Chair MP Andy Savoy are reportedly engaged in a campaign to persuade MPs to encourage active participation.

The Leadership Review

3. (SBU) One key piece of business will be a review of Prime Minister Paul Martin's leadership. Commentators believe that elite, levels of the party have conspired to allow the PM to breeze through his first review by ensuring there are no viable alternatives. National media have nonetheless suggested the names of potential leadership candidates, none of whom appear interested in interrupting Paul Martin's term as Prime Minister by starting the kind of informal leadership campaign that Martin used to unseat Prime Minister Jean Chrtien. Some media commentators take this free-pass leadership review as the reason why riding associations appear generally disinterested in the process.

The Policy Element

4. (SBU) An ambitious policy agenda features 88 items, but the only policy items that are expected to draw notice are the Same-Sex Marriage resolution. There was a growing sense that the convention would put Liberal Party divisions on display, which is undoubtedly the reason why PM Martin felt it necessary to get the missile defense issue off the table. The structure of the convention is still somewhat in flux, but it appears there will be a series of 12 workshops to discuss the 88 items, some of which will receive focus as Priority Resolutions.

5. (SBU) The resolution on same-sex marriage was co-sponsored by the Liberal Party's Standing Committee on Policy Development, indicating that it came from high levels of the Liberal government and the Young Liberals of Canada. There is still significant resistance to same-sex marriage in the Liberal caucus and the convention will be a rare opportunity for opponents of the plan to speak out against the legislation and garner some headlines before debate resumes in the House of Commons.

6. (SBU) The Alberta wing of the Liberal Party sponsored a call for the complete legalization and taxation of marijuana. National media reports that the University of Calgary Young Liberals forced this resolution through the provincial body. This resolution is not a priority item and is the last of five issues that the Justice and Constitutional Workshop must address in one and a half hours, so it is not likely that the resolution will pass and it may not even receive much attention. It should be noted, however, that the leader of the Marijuana Party of Canada, Marc Boris St-Maurice,

announced Monday that he would be quitting his party and joining the Liberal Party to attend the convention and will try to raise the profile of the marginalized resolution and marijuana bills before the house.

17. (SBU) Comment: The missile defense debate was shaping up to be a divisive issue in this convention that would have highlighted the fissures in the party while possibly leading to an embarrassing vote against Canada,s joining the program. And it didn,t help that the most serious opponents of the missile defense program are from the Quebec wing of the party where Martin needs to make inroads if the Liberals are to regain a majority government. Thus Martin felt he had to put this issue to rest before the convention. This leaves only the same-sex marriage issue to underscore the party,s divisions, the debate over which will be filled with tension, but manageable. If well-handled, it could even reduce the &democratic deficit,8 one of Martin,s key campaign promises. Though media commentary suggests a disconnect between Liberal Elites and the party grassroots on the question of the leadership review, at the policy level it appears that the grassroots are active in promoting their agendas. End Comment
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